

Letter from Einstein to PM India Nehru

13-Jun-1947

PM of the Indian Govt, New Delhi, India

My dear Mr. Nehru:

May I tell you of the deep emotion with which I read recently that the Indian Constituent Assembly has abolished untouchability? I know how large a part you have played in the various phases of India's struggle for emancipation, and how grateful lovers of freedom must be to you, as well as to your great teacher, Mahatma Gandhi. Men everywhere felt freer and stronger because of the act of liberation which has taken place in India.

I read that the curse of the pariah was about to be lifted from millions of Hindus in the very days when the attention of the world was fixed on the problem of another group of human beings who, like the untouchables, have been the victims of persecution and discrimination for centuries.

Those with a sense of history-and I know how eloquently you have written on this them-could not fail to be aware of the dramatic coincidence by which the plea of the Jewish people for equality was being heard by the UN at the very time when a revolutionary measure of redemption was being passed in your country. And because you have been the consistent champion of the forces of political and economic enlightenment in the Orient, I address myself to you in regard to the rights of an ancient people whose roots are in the East.

I should like to discuss only one problem with you-the ethical issues involved in the Zionist effort to recreate a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The legal aspects of the question, the precise commitments contained in the Balfour Declaration and the Mandate, are not the elements I propose to stress, though I appreciate their significance. I shall therefore not review a chapter of contemporary history with which you are familiar. But as a person to whom considerations of morality in international relations are not indifferent, I should like to dwell on the factors of justice and equality which are involved, and whose violation I would protest equally with you.

Long before the emergence of Hitler, I made the cause of Zionism mine because through it I saw a means of correcting a flagrant wrong. I refer to the peculiar disability suffered by the Jewish people by which they were deprived of the opportunity to live on the same basis as other peoples. The bigotry of the chauvinists and racists, whose doctrines have brought so much evil to mankind, has always been alien to me. Were the vision of an international society, a true parliament of man, ever to be realized, I venture to say I should be among its most sympathetic supporters. But even in the interests of this ultimate ideal, the preliminary steps are surely the removal of the stigma of inferiority from every group and people in the world. The Jewish people alone has for centuries been in the anomalous position of being victimized and hounded as a people, though bereft of all the rights and protections which even the smallest people normally has. Jews have been persecuted as individuals; the Jewish people has been unable to develop fruitfully as a cultural and ethnic group. The spirit of the people as well as the bodies of its members have been assailed. Zionism offered the means of ending this discrimination. Through the return to the land to which they were bound by close historic ties, and, since the dispersion, hallowed in their daily prayers, Jews sought to abolish their pariah status among peoples.

The Advent of Hitler underscored with a savage logic all the disastrous implications contained in the abnormal situation in which Jews found themselves. Millions of Jews perished not only because they were caught in the Nazi murder machine but also because there was no spot on the globe where they could find sanctuary. I need not remind you what the Nazi extermination program cost my people, nor of the tragic plight of the survivors. India, I am sure, mourned not only for six million men, women and children killed in gas-chambers and crematoriums, but also for a civilization which permitted this horror to take place. And I believe that wherever men dream of justice and struggle for its presence, the cry of those who escaped from the Nazi charnel-house must be heard.

The Jewish survivors demand the right to dwell amid brothers, on the soil of their fathers. Their need is so desperate, their longing so natural that it is superfluous to elaborate the point. There is, however, a legitimate and relevant question which

must be answered. Can Jewish need, no matter how acute, be met without the infringement of the vital rights of others? My answer is in the affirmative. One of the most extraordinary features of the Jewish rebuilding of Palestine is that the influx of Jewish pioneers has resulted not in the displacement and impoverishment of the local Arab population, but in its phenomenal increase and greater prosperity.

There has been much talk lately of a Zionist "invasion". Surely, a consideration of the facts must reveal how irresponsible and dishonest is such an accusation. Jews settled in Palestine on the basis of international agreements entered into by Arabs as well as the nations of the world. They bought every inch of the land on which they settled. Furthermore, and most important for this phase of the argument, the Arab population of Palestine doubled in size since the Balfour Declaration, whereas in the adjoining independent Arab states, the population remained static. Jewish colonization has not only raised the standard of life and the wage level of the Palestinian Arab, it has the highest rate of natural (population) increase in the world. This hardly constitutes "invasion".

However, I shall not pretend to misunderstand the nature of Arab opposition. Though the Arab of Palestine has benefited physically and economically, he wants exclusive national sovereignty, such as enjoyed by the Arabs of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Lebanon or Syria. It is a legitimate and natural desire, and justice would seem to call for its satisfaction. At the close of world war 1, 99% of the vast, underpopulated territories liberated from the Turks by the Allies were set aside for the national aspirations of the Arabs. Five independent Arab states have since been established in these territories. Only 1% was reserved for the Jewish people in the land of their origin. The decision which led to the proclamation of the Balfour Declaration was not arbitrary, nor the choice of territory capricious. It took into account the needs and aspirations of both Arab and Jew, and certainly, the lion's share did not fall to the Jews. In the august scale of justice, which weighs need against need, there is not doubt as to whose is more heavy. The "small notch" in the land of their fathers, granted the Jewish people, somewhat redresses the balance.

I believe there is still another factor which must weigh heavily in any consideration of the Zionist case, namely what Jews have actually in Palestine, and the fashion of

their accomplishment. I find profoundly gratifying the fact that the reconstruction of Palestine has taken not through the exploitation of native workers-the usual pattern of imperialism-but through the heroic toil of Jewish pioneers. The once malaria-ridden swamps, the stony mountain slopes, the salt shores of the Dead Sea, now fertile and blooming, are evidence of a creative impulse whose thwarting would make mankind, as well as Jew and Arab, the poorer. Jewish labor has created living space; it has made Palestine bigger, and the world richer. Nor can I ignore the new concepts of economic equality which Jewish workers have brought to the Middle East. Their network of flourishing cooperatives, their vigorous trade-union movement, are token of a social idealism which is an organic part of their striving for national regeneration. Through the force of this social vision, both Arab and Jew will go forward.

I know that the rivalries of power politics and the egotism of petty nationalist appetites seek to stifle the glorious renaissance which has begun in Palestine. May I appeal to you, as the leader of a movement of social and national enfranchisement, to recognize in Zionism a similar movement whose realization will add to the peace and progress of the Orient. Free Jewish immigration to Palestine, and the right of the Jews to continue the upholding of their ancient homeland without artificial restrictions, will increase the sum of well being in the world. It is time to make an end to the ghetto status of Jews in Palestine, and to the pariah status of Jews among peoples. I trust that you, who so badly have struggled for freedom and justice, will place your great influence on behalf of the claim for justice made by the people who for so long and so dreadfully have suffered from its denial.

Yours very sincerely,

Albert Einstein

Nehru's response to Einstein

My Dear Professor Einstein,

I received your letter of June 13th and read it with care and attention which it deserved. It is a privilege and an honor to be addressed by you and I was happy to receive your letter, though the subject is a sad one.

I appreciate very much what you say about the recent decision of India's Constituent Assembly to abolish untouchability. This indeed has been our policy for many years past and it is matter of deep satisfaction to us that what we have been trying to do in many ways will soon have the sanction of law, as embodied in the constitution, behind it. You say very rightly that the degradation of any group of human beings is a degradation of the civilization that has produced it. Ever since Mahatma Gandhi began to play a role in Indian politics and social affairs, he laid the greatest stress on the complete liquidation of untouchability and all that goes with it. He made it part of our freedom struggle and emphasized that it was folly to talk of political freedom when social freedom was denied or restricted for a large number of persons.

You know that in India there has been the deepest sympathy for the great sufferings of the Jewish people. We have rejected completely the racial doctrine which the Nazis and the Fascists proclaimed. Unfortunately, however, that doctrine is still believed in and acted upon by other people. You are no doubt aware of the treatment accorded by the Union of South Africa to Indians there on racial grounds. We made this an issue in the United Nations General Assembly last year and achieved a measure of success there. In raising this question before the United Nations we did not emphasize the limited aspect of it, but stood on the broader plane of human rights for all, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations.

What has happened in recent years, more especially since the rise to power of Hitler in Germany, was followed by us with deep pain and anxiety. You are quite right in thinking that India has mourned the horrors which resulted in the death of millions of Jews in the murder machines which were set up in Germany and elsewhere. That was terrible enough, but it was still more terrible to contemplate a civilization which, in spite of its proud achievements, could produce this horror.

I need to assure you, therefore, of our deepest sympathy for the Jews and for all they have undergone during these past years. If we can help them in any way I hope and trust that India will not merely stand by and look on. As you know, national policies are unfortunately essentially selfish policies. Each country thinks of its own interest first and then of other interests. If it so happens that some international policy fits in with the national policy of the country, then that nation uses brave language about

international betterment. But as soon as that international policy seems to run counter to national interests or selfishness, then a host of reasons are found not to follow that international policy.

We in India, engrossed as we have been in our struggle for freedom and in our domestic difficulties, have been unable to play any effective part in world affairs. The coming months, and possibly years, will not free us from these grave problems of our own country but I have no doubt that we shall play a progressively more important part in international affairs. What that part will be in the future I can only guess. I earnestly hope that we shall continue to adhere to the idealism which has guided our struggle for freedom. But we have seen often enough idealism followed by something far less noble, and so it would be folly for me to prophesy what the future holds for us. All we can do is try our utmost to keep up standards of moral conduct both in our domestic affairs and in the international sphere.

The problem of Palestine, you will no doubt agree with me, is extraordinarily difficult and intricate. Where rights come into conflict it is not an easy matter to decide. With all our sympathy for the Jews we must and do feel that the rights and future of the Arabs are involved in this question. You have yourself framed the question: "Can Jewish need, no matter how acute, be met without the infringement of the vital rights of others?" Your answer to this question is in the affirmative. Broadly put, many may agree with you in that answer, but when we come to the specific application of this answer, the matter is not at all simple.

But legalities apart, and even apart from the many other issues involved, we have to face a certain existing situation. I do not myself see how this problem can be resolved by violence and conflict on one side or the other. Even if such violence and conflict achieves certain ends for the moment, they must necessarily be temporary. I do earnestly hope that some kind of agreement might be arrived at between the Arabs and the Jews. I do not think even an outside power can impose its will for long or enforce some new arrangement against the will of the parties concerned.

I confess that while I have a very great deal of sympathy for the Jews I feel sympathy for the Arabs also in their predicament. In any event, the whole issue has become one of high emotion and deep passion on both sides. Unless men are big enough on

either side to find a solution which is just and generally agreeable to the parties concerned, I see no effective solution for the present.

I have paid a good deal of attention to this problem of Palestine and have read books and pamphlets on the subject issued on either side; yet I cannot say that I know all about it, or that I am competent to pass a final opinion as to what should be done. I know that the Jews have done a wonderful piece of work in Palestine and have raised the standards of the people there, but one question troubles me. After all these remarkable achievements, why have they failed to gain the goodwill of the Arabs? Why do they want to compel the Arabs to submit against their will to certain demands? That way of approach has been one which does not lead to a settlement, but rather to the continuation of British rule in Palestine. We know, to our cost, that when a third party dominates, it is exceedingly difficult for the others to settle their differences, even when that third party has good intentions – and third parties seldom have such intentions!

It is difficult for me to argue this question with you who know so much more than I do. I have only indicated to you some of my own difficulties in the matter. But whatever those difficulties might be, I would assure you, with all earnestness, that I would like to do all in my power to help the Jewish people in their distress, in so far as I can do so, without injuring other people.

The world is in a very sorry mess and the appetite for war and destruction has not been satisfied yet. Here in India, we stand on the verge of independence for which we have struggled for so long. Yet there is no joy in the country at this turning point in our long history and there will be no celebrations of this historic event next month, for we are all full of sorrow for